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Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary American Visual Art

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A twenty-minute talk with slides

Left/Right identified thus in bold typeface

In the 1980s, many fashionable American critics argued that the best new contemporary art broke radically with the past. They believed that what they called postmodern culture drastically changed styles of communication and everyday life experience. After this decisive break with the past, so they claimed, only entirely new art forms could be intellectually challenging. These postmodernists believed that the best new art broke dramatically with modernist tradition. Postmodernism was not just what came after modernism but an entirely new sensibility. Now in the twenty-first century we can see that this way of thinking is wrong. Today, as in the past, the very best art builds upon tradition.

Why, then, did influential commentators adopt this way of thinking about tradition and innovation? Here a philosophical perspective is essential. Champions of postmodernism were frequently inspired by the American Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson. He argued that a very radical transformation in the very nature of everyday experience was taking place. More recently champions of his postmodernist way of thinking note that the web, Email, and digital image reproduction change drastically how we write, view images, and handle information. And of course our iPods use revolutionary new technologies. Jameson supported his analysis by comparing paintings by Vincent van Gogh's and Andy Warhol.

Slide: van Gogh**slide: Warhol**

The Dutch artist shows a shoe, an intensely expressive object taken from the working life of a peasant, Warhol, by contrast, presents fashionable commodities with no concern for inner feeling. In postmodern art, van Gogh's concern with spiritual depth is no longer possible. Arguing that traditional painting was dead, the postmodernists said that refusing to respond to new technologies was aesthetically and politically reactionary.

These claims have not withstood the test of time. Warhol's fascination with mass media, with image appropriations, and with banal themes from everyday life has been immensely suggestive for very many artists. He was the most influential artist of the late twentieth century. But Warhol worked within a long tradition in which high art borrows from popular culture. Compare, for example, his use of pop materials with the newsprint in Picasso's collage.

Slide: Warhol**slide Picasso**

Nothing is taken away from his greatness by identifying how he extends the concerns of his precursors.

Arthur Danto, our most distinguished philosophical critic, has argued that in one way Warhol's art does radically break with the past. Before Warhol, visual art was defined as representation or at least, after the birth of abstract painting, as a form of expression.

Slide: Poussin

slide: Kandinsky

Poussin's picture is a work of art because depicts the Romans. And Kandinsky's non-representational painting is art because it expresses feelings. But Warhol demonstrated that any object whatsoever set in the right context was visual art.

Slide: Warhol, *Brillo Box*

Danto's key example, *Brillo Box*, made in 1964, is visually indistinguishable from the brillo boxes then found in American grocery stores. Warhol's object is art because in the gallery it inspires reflection on aesthetic theory. In the store, that same object would be just a container for brillo pads.

Like the postmodernists, Danto thinks that something dramatic happened in the late twentieth century. Jameson and the postmodernists offered a sociological analysis. Because the structures of everyday life changed, they argued that art too should change. Danto offers a philosophical argument. Warhol discovered the nature of visual art and that so the practice of artists changed drastically. In the 1990s Danto added a second point to this ontological analysis. Once Warhol discovered that a brillo box, that banal everyday object, could when set in the museum be art, then the history of art had ended. *Brillo Box* marks the end of that history. After 1964, very exciting new works of art continued to be made but no longer is there progress in that tradition. No longer does art define its identity in relation to an historical narrative.

Traditional Western art history tells a story in which Giotto leads to Leonardo and on towards the present.

Slide: Giotto

Slide: Leonardo

Clement Greenberg, the most important modernist critic, argued that this old master tradition goes straight towards abstraction. Monet flattened the traditional picture space, and so soon we saw the shallow illusionistic picture plane of Abstract Expressionists like Robert Motherwell.

Slide: Monet

Slide: Motherwell

But in our post-historical era such stories in which earlier paintings lead to late ones can no longer plausibly be told about contemporary art. Now that tradition is ended.

Around 1830 Hegel argued that the history of art has ended. Hegel's claim was correct, Danto argues, only this date for the end of this history was much too early. In arguing against Jameson's way of thinking, Danto appeals to another Marxist idea. Marx and Engels imagined a future communist utopia in which we hunt, fish, rear cattle and write criticism without being forced into the limiting roles of hunter, fisherman, herdsman and critic. After modernism, artists can have this freedom because in our post-historical era they escape from historical conflicts. No longer struggling to be part of a narrative history, artists engage in a form of play. Danto's philosophical argument does not tell our post-historical artists how to proceed. Indeed Danto himself has emphasized that there are no direct connections between his abstract aesthetic and the value judgments made in his criticism. But his analysis does suggest how to understand the role of tradition in contemporary art. Nowadays artists can employ styles from all periods and every culture without seeking to take the historical development of art further.

The Irish-American abstract artist Sean Scully has most interestingly responded to this post-historical situation. Scully, who is greatly admired by Danto, was born in 1945 and moved to New York City in 1975. From Matisse Scully learned the expressive power of large-scale all-over patterns.

Slide: Matisse

Mondrian showed him the importance of geometrical abstraction based upon horizontals and verticals.

Slide: Mondrian

And Rothko taught him about the spiritual power of stark juxtapositions of intense fields of color.

Slide: Rothko

But identifying its sources does not tell all that much about Scully's own paintings, which look very distinctive.

Slide: Scully, early 1980s**Slide: Scully: 1990s**

Like Matisse, Scully is a sensuous painter who is much influenced by the patterns discovered in Islamic Morocco. But unlike the Frenchman he is often involved in presenting conflicts. With their very varied colors, Scully's large pictures appear unlike Mondrian's austere small-scale compositions. And compared to Rothko, whose later art mostly presents tragic feelings, Scully's painting has a very wide expressive range.

The biggest difference between Scully and his precursors lies in their relationship to art history. Matisse started as a belated post-Impressionist and then did something radically new. Mondrian rejected figuration to make extremely pure abstractions. And Rothko's sublime pictures advanced beyond figurative tradition. Building upon this tradition, Scully makes abstract paintings that employ the rhythms of contemporary urban life. Our cities are filled with repeated architectural forms. And classical and popular music uses rhythms. In our cities we watch diverse lives unfolding, everything happening to everyone everywhere all at once. Early modernists like Manet depicted the rhythms of urban life.

Slide: Manet

Scully shows such repetitions in his paintings, doing abstractly for our urban life what figurative cityscape artists did for their cities.

Slide: Scully

He extends the concerns of Matisse, Mondrian and Rothko and the other American Abstract Expressionism.

According to the postmodernists, painting like Scully's is not really possible. After the radical break with modernist tradition, interesting art needed to find entirely new styles of visual thinking. But according to Danto, once we acknowledge that art's history has no direction, then no one way of making art is the preordained way to proceed. Everything is possible—Scully's reworking of Abstract Expressionist tradition, the image appropriations of Warhol's heirs, and everything else. If you wish to make figurative pictures or bronze sculptures, then that too is allowed. You can do anything knowing that history in no way restricts your freedom. No one can tell you in advance how good your art will be.

When Scully was very young one of his key influences was van Vogt's *Chair*.

Slide: van Gogh, *Chair*

Admiring its direct physical presence, he wanted to make art with such power.

Slide: Scully

For the followers of Warhol, that ambition makes no sense. For them replicating van Gogh's spirituality cannot be a legitimate artistic goal. Scully, who does not admire Warhol, wants to make paintings that can stand alongside *Chair*. However much he wants to continue the Abstract Expressionist tradition, Scully knows that working in his fashion is merely one choice, not historically inevitable. In our post-historical era the relationship between tradition and innovation has changed radically.

Danto describes the post-historical art world. Scully shows how an artist can respond to that novel situation. Working entirely independently, philosopher and artist thus reveal the implications of what happens after

modernism. Scully knows that making his expressive abstractions is merely one option for a post-historical artist. And so what adds authentic intensity to his art and makes it worthy of admiration, is this sustained struggle to pursue tradition in an era skeptical about such ways of thinking.

Preparing this lecture, I asked myself how to best present Danto's aesthetic theory and Scully's art here in China. Danto has extremely wide-ranging intellectual interests. One of his books deals with Asian philosophy. But he has not focused sustained attention on Chinese art. Scully is much celebrated and widely collected in Europe, Australia and Japan. But because his tradition is very distant from China's, I expect that Chinese art critics will think his paintings exotic imports.

When in 1998 I had the honor of lecturing at the National Academy of Art, Hangzhou, I got some ideas relevant to this dilemma. Very quickly the Chinese students understood the concerns of Warhol. When I discussed Danto's account of *Brillo Box*, a student killed some flies and, holding them, asked, "Is this a work of art?" I was impressed—I thought that he had immediately grasped Danto's view of pop art. We discussed precedents for this use of chance in European and Chinese art. Then I pointed to some discarded cartons and asked whether they could be seen as art. The Chinese students certainly understood the analogy with Warhol's *Brillo Box*. But when I discussed Abstract Expressionism, explaining the importance of Jackson Pollock was more difficult. Scully's art may seem alien, but Danto's Hegelian aesthetic deals with concerns familiar in China.

In Europe the birth of abstraction depended upon a dialectical response to the perfection of realism. Once in the nineteenth-century illusionism was perfected, European artists turned to other goals. In modernism tradition Manet, cubism and Abstract Expressionism gradually moved away from naturalism towards abstraction.

Slide: Manet

Slide: Jackson Pollock

Mimesis, the central concern of European art from Giotto's time onward into the nineteenth-century, was rejected. To my Western eye, the obsessive fascination with brushwork allows traditional Chinese painting to hover between figuration and abstraction.

Slide: Chinese painting

And so there was little incentive to move onward to pure abstraction.

That earlier visit to China sparked my interest in universal histories of art. How is it possible, I wondered, to write a history that looks outside Europe? China has a long highly complex essentially self-sufficient tradition. And so it is not obvious how to relate that history to the story of European art. Western museums aspire to collect art from all cultures. Painting from Europe is presented in an historical narrative. But because China has an independent history, it is not clear how to display its art. Dealing with tradition and innovation in the museum requires identifying both changes and continuities. Walking through the Metropolitan in New York for example, you see how European painting of the fourteenth-century leads towards modernism. And when you go across to the galleries of Asian art, you observe the parallel histories of Chinese and Korean painting and pottery.

Danto's aesthetic describes the logic of this post-historical museum. The history of art is closed we can display art from all cultures. Balancing tradition and innovation is a central concern for the museum. There need be no break between the galleries devoted to older and contemporary art. Scully's perspective on tradition is exemplary, for it shows how a contemporary painter can extend the achievement of modernism. Had Scully merely pursued engagement with tradition without taking notice of contemporary art, at most he would have been a magnificent eccentric. By responding to the post-historical culture, he has taken note of the contemporary museum on his own chosen artistic terms. My forthcoming book on the art museum discusses these topics in full detail. One of the people to whom that publication is dedicated is Professor Ding Ning, who has helped me to learn about Chinese art. And so this seems the right place to acknowledge that generous support.

Thank you!